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ABSTRACT

Part of a 10 booklet series on talented and gifted education, the booklet discusses the parenting of gifted and talented children. Some myths and realities about giftedness are examined, along with differences and similarities between gifted and other children. The nurturance and broadening of children who are gifted intellectually, in the visual and performing arts, and in physical development are considered. The emotional development of gifted children is defined, and basic stages of growth are outlined, including trust, autonomy, initiative, and testing rules and relationships. Social development is discussed in terms of understanding individual style, peer groups, social growth indicators, and ways to support growth. Moral growth is described in terms of inner controls, values and decisions, and parental guidance and expectations. Techniques and notes of assurance are presented on providing experiences for gifted children which fully develop their intellect, emotions, social sensibility, and morals. Lists of suggested readings and sources of information on talented and gifted children are also given. (DLS)

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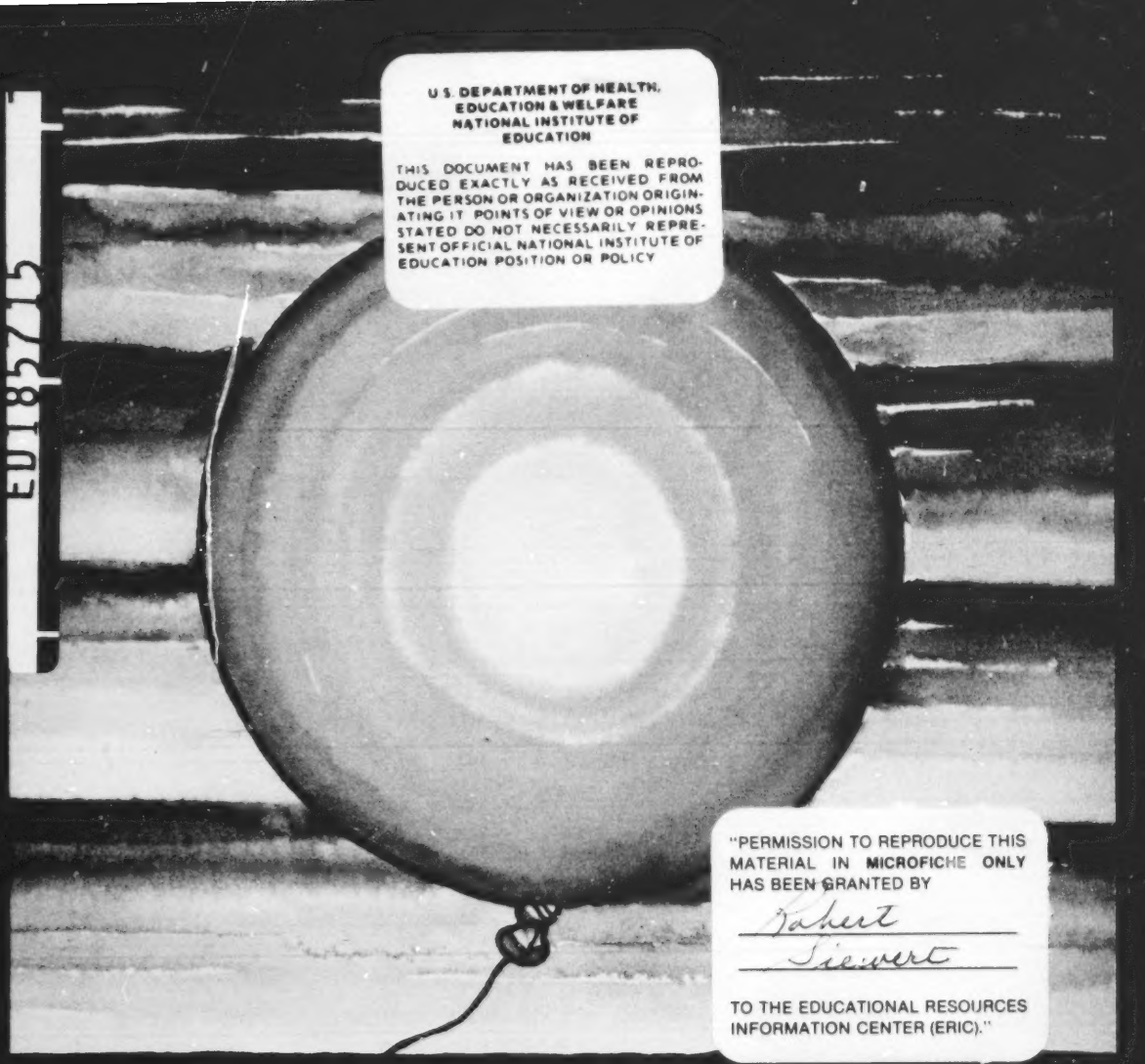

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Parenting Gifted Children

PARENTING GIFTED CHILDREN

Samellyn Wood

This series was cooperatively developed by the following: Project Director - Robert Siewert, Specialist, Talented and Gifted Programs, Oregon Department of Education, Salem, Oregon; Project Coordinator - Carleen Matthews, Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory; Series Editor - Candy Withycombe; and Richard Arends, University of Oregon.

Oregon Association for Talented And Gifted

Oregon State DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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FOREWORD

This booklet describes myths and realities about giftedness and the needs for nurturance and broadening of the gifted child.

Emotional development is defined, basic stages of growth are given, and from these descriptions, parents can select the most appropriate parenting techniques for those stages.

Social development, individual styles, peer groups and social growth indicators are described to help parents support growth in this area.

Moral growth is described in terms of inner controls, values, and parental guidance and expectations.

Parents are given techniques and assurance to provide experiences for the gifted children which fully develop their intellect, emotions, social sensibility and morals.

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Two mothers talked casually over coffee. "You know Jimmy, that brainy kid down the street? The skinny one with the thick glasses? That kid read two sets of encyclopedias this summer and he's just starting first grade!"

"But the poor child can't catch a ball or ride a bicycle. He must have a terrible complex. The other kids make such fun of him."

MYTHS AND REALITIES ABOUT GIFTEDNESS

MYTHS

Jimmy is the mythical gifted child; not many people know him. Real gifted children may be like him in some respects, but usually they are physically strong and healthy. Many read early with intense curiosity and remarkable comprehension of ideas, but some gifted children may not learn to read until late into primary school. A few may be withdrawn, but more often they are leaders. Gifted children are not necessarily gifted in all areas. However, they frequently have multiple gifts. Fine athletes are often excellent students; brilliant mathematicians are often accomplished musicians.

The myth of the gifted child has developed for a reason. There are gifted children whose families have devoted their full time and energy to the development of a particular talent, to the exclusion of activities in other areas. These children have actually been handicapped by their lack of exposure to a broad range of experiences and ideas.

FULL HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Development of children's special gifts need to occur in connection with full development in all other areas, if these children are to attain their potential for both achievement and joy. The areas include intellectual, aesthetic, physical, emotional, social and moral spheres.

- Intellectual and aesthetic maturity encourages the development of startling achievements, inventions and creations.

- Physical maturity supports a positive body image, confidence in self, health and energy for active participation in life's experiences.

- Emotional maturity provides the confidence to seek out challenges, learn from mistakes and respond to new experiences with an open, eager spirit.

- Social maturity supports the capacity to establish good interpersonal and group relationships and the growth of independence.

- Moral maturity provides an understanding of values and the ability to make wise decisions.

DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES BETWEEN GIFTED AND OTHERS

Gifted children have much in common with other children, but they are different in important ways. Parents must recognize and provide for both the similarities and the differences. All children pass through the same stages of growth, but the gifted may pass through some stages more quickly. All children need to inquire, to explore, to analyze, to synthesize, to create means of self-expression and to formulate concepts that help them understand the world as they see it. Gifted children need to inquire further, explore more boldly, analyze more deeply, synthesize more fully, formulate concepts that are different and new. While gifted children may be more advanced than their peers in one or two areas, they may well be on the same level in others. They, too, lose their tempers, laugh in delight, cry, giggle, whine and shout. They, too, need constant doses of love and affection.

Many parents search for experiences which will provide their children with in-depth exploration, development of special talents, wide exposure to many experiences and development in all areas of human growth.

NURTURANCE AND BROADENING OF THE GIFTED CHILD

INTELLECTUAL GIFTEDNESS

Children who are intellectually gifted need a great deal of stimulation for the tremendous learning of which they are capable. They can deal with abstract ideas in depth at an earlier age than can other children; they require only the chance to learn. Parents of the gifted are often willing to answer the myriad of questions their children pose. They discuss possible answers with them and help them further investigate ideas and principles through the use of home, school and community resources. In addition, parents ask the children many questions.

- o "What if we mixed these?"
- o "Why do you suppose it works that way?"
- o "How else could that be used?"

The home environment may be designed to allow development of special interests and to encourage broad exploration. Learning games and activities may be enjoyed by the whole family. Scrap materials are stockpiled for a young engineer to build spaceships or seismographs. A budding scientist is helped through observation and simple experiments to discover and describe many natural laws.

Intellectually gifted children also need encouragement to explore academic areas where they may not be gifted and will have to work harder for success. Writing may

be Sara's forte, and she needs time and quiet places to write, but she also needs math skills.

GIFTEDNESS AND TALENT IN VISUAL ARTS, PERFORMING ARTS OR PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT

Similarly, children with special abilities in the visual or performing arts or in psychomotor skills need the opportunity to develop those abilities. A child gifted in mime needs to see others perform and to receive encouragement and instruction in improving his or her own performance. An enthusiastic preschool musician can begin Suzuki violin. A determined young gymnast can practice on a low, backyard balance beam.

These children need broadening experiences too. A talented swimmer needs frequent practice and coaching but also needs to visit theatres and museums.

GENERAL BROADENING

Parents of the gifted can encourage their children's full growth in many ways. A gifted mechanic studies French each night before going to "play" in her shop. The child who continually opts to sit with a thousand-piece puzzle is taken for nature walks where he soon learns to identify plant and insect life with the same enthusiasm he brings to his puzzles. The aspiring chemist who prefers her basement laboratory to all other places is guided in reading biographies of great chemists, then other biographies, historical fiction, science fiction and drama.

EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT: DEFINITION AND STAGES

The emotional development of gifted children supports their gifts. A strong sense of self-confidence and competence provides the impetus for these children to seek new information and master new skills without fear of failure. It also frees them to appreciate and accept others both similar to and different from them.

Children pass through stages in their emotional growth just as they do in other areas of growth. Parents can help them in each stage so they can move successfully on to the next.

TRUST

First, children must establish a basic trust in both themselves and the world around them. They need to learn that when they cry out, others will respond to them. Otherwise they will spend the rest of their lives trying to establish this trust. Further growth is crippled by anxiety. When parents respond in a loving, consistent way to an infant, this trust can be formed in the first two years of life.

AUTONOMY

Autonomy becomes the next major task. Gifted toddlers often seem driven to prove "I can do." Their awareness of the world around them and their desire for accomplishment can be so far beyond their physical

capabilities that intense frustration results. Yet even the strongest "no" and harshest punishment cannot always stop a young child from learning what he or she can do. Relentless experimentation finally results in the opening of a child-proof bottle or the disassembling of the kitchen blender. Some gifted children appear almost hyperactive as they dart from stimulus to stimulus seeking to see, to know and to understand. Others have a concentration span equal to that of the professional researcher. And close at hand are weary parents wondering about the remote possibility of a neat home and a semblance of organized living. But if children's curiosity and drive for autonomy can be safely channeled rather than forbidden, a basic sense of personal identity, importance and mastery will be established.

INITIATIVE

A growing sense of initiative increases forays into the outside world. Even when children spend most of their time with peers, the family is still their "safe harbor." Parents provide the support that allows children to take initiative with confidence. Gifted children may need especially strong doses of acceptance and reassurance when they meet peers or adults who do not understand them. When being "different" becomes painful, they seek home and family to have their self-esteem recharged.

TESTING RULES AND RELATIONSHIPS

Gifted adolescents fervently test and retest the rules and relationships in their lives. They have to, for they must establish their independence before they can securely move into adult interdependent relationships. If parents can recognize the need for independence and self-understanding as a genuine growth need and not a

personal assault on family members, they can learn to help their children through this difficult period. Effective communication can bind the family together as adolescents search for and discover their own identity and place in the world.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

UNDERSTANDING INDIVIDUAL STYLE

Social development brings additional dilemmas. Many gifted children play happily with children of all abilities and interests and have a wide circle of friends. Others have only one or two close friends. Parents worry that these children may be lonely or may be failing to develop needed social skills.

Their concern is legitimate. People need other people, physically, emotionally and intellectually. But children differ in their social needs just as they do in other needs. Some children seem to need many friends, thriving on peer acceptance and opportunities to participate in, or lead groups. Bobby wants desperately to be well-liked and feels competition keenly. It was wisely decided that he shouldn't skip a grade although he could easily do the work. Other children are very happy with a few close friends. Julie is satisfied working alone or with her one close friend in her accelerated program. She accepts herself and her performance with ease. Neither child is maladjusted. they are simply different.

PEER GROUPS

Chronological age is only one criterion which may be used in the establishment of a peer group. Children can also be peers in mental age or interests so that a

child who consistently prefers older friends may still be socially comfortable and adept.

SOCIAL GROWTH INDICATORS

The important guidelines of social development for parents to observe are whether a child:

- Is sensitive to the needs of others
- Can show appropriate concern for and responses to others
- Uses words and behaviors which reflect confidence and comfort with others
- Has a few close friends

WAYS TO SUPPORT GROWTH

Parents can provide early social opportunities through a playgroup for toddlers or a preschool experience for three and four year olds. Neighborhood and school friends can be involved in interesting home projects or taken with the family to a library, museum or zoo. Parental approval can do much to encourage budding friendships. Candidly expressed disapproval may discourage them. Listening to their children can help parents discover why some children consistently choose to be alone. The problem may be resulting from a lack of shared interests with other children. A child's own insecurities or misbehaviors may be the root of the difficulty. When parents understand the cause of the behavior, they can often assist their children. For example, Jenny needs help recognizing when she becomes too bossy. Once she understands, she may be welcomed by the new girl next door.

MORAL GROWTH

Moral growth plays an essential role in supporting the full development of gifted children. They need to develop self-discipline, an understanding of personal values and an ability to make decisions.

INNER CONTROLS

Gifted children, like all children, must develop a system of inner controls. They are not born with acceptable behavior patterns and means of expressing emotions; parents and others help them develop these. Too often bright children are expected to behave at the level of their intellectual performance, but they are just not ready. Unrealistic expectations lead to great frustrations for both parent and child. Most articulate two year olds still dissolve in tears when another toddler takes a favorite toy. Often precocious thirteen year olds suffer painful adolescent self-doubts.

VALUES, DECISIONS AND THE GIFTED

Gifted children need help exploring, understanding and operating on their personal values. The intellectually gifted, particularly, have the keen insight and powers of abstract reasoning when quite young to assess situations and recognize their own position and power within them. Their ability to analyze and synthesize enables them to see causes, consequences and interrelationships. They learn how things affect them--what makes them feel happy or unhappy, capable or ignorant, satisfied or restless. And they learn how

things affect other people. They constantly seek to clarify their own values and the values of others through examining experiences and ideas.

PARENTAL GUIDANCE AND EXPECTATIONS

Consequently, many gifted children do not accept authority without question. They demand full explanations for rules and requests; they scoff at "easy answers." When they consider explanations valid they readily cooperate. If they judge the explanations inadequate, they are apt to choose their own course of action. The inexhaustible questioning and independent behavior of many gifted children may thoroughly wear out their parents. However, as the parents continue to listen and respond to them, they model such characteristics as patience, tolerance and acceptance--attributes most are eager for their children to value and adopt. Further, through open discussions they help their children clearly define personal values and operationalize these values in a wide variety of situations. For example, through an active investigation of many churches and religious philosophies, Charlene developed commitment to her family's religion as well as an appreciation for many other belief systems.

Similarly, children need parental guidance as they learn to make decisions. Decision-making is not a simple question of choosing "right" and "wrong." Children must learn to assess total situations, looking at individual circumstances and examining motives, needs, background and behavior of the people involved, as well as possible consequences of actions. They then need to evaluate all this information in relation to their personal values.

Even gifted children are not born knowing it is wrong to pick the neighbor's flowers without permission. All

children first behave to please others. They then formalize their behavior according to externally imposed rules. As they mature they learn to internalize the rules and modify them according to individual circumstances and needs.

Because gifted children can deal with abstract ideas at an early age they may go through stages of questioning and testing rules and values sooner and more vigorously than other children. With help they can learn to make examined decisions at an early age. Parents can give them frequent choices and help them look at the consequences of their decisions. Family members can tell stories where children identify motives behind behavior in a particular situation and decide what possible courses of action the characters might take. Parents can ask mind teasers like:

- "Is it worse to steal ten cents or a dollar? Why?"
- "What might someone else do if they were caught shoplifting?"
- "What might you do? Why would you act differently?"

Children, too, can generate these teasers. Family problems can be solved through negotiations, with both children and parents expressing their ideas, examining alternative solutions and anticipated consequences.

THE BIG PICTURE

PROVIDING FULL EXPERIENCES

Growth and learning in all areas of development can be encouraged and integrated through parents providing full or total experiences. Both parents at home and working parents can give quality time to share such experiences with their children. A few minutes are enough to share meaningful love and ideas.

During a trip to the zoo, parents and children can learn together while they enjoy each other. Parents can promote intellectual skills and imagination by asking such questions as:

- "Why might those different species of birds be placed together?"
- "Why is that cage constructed with those heavy beams?"
- "Why does a zebra have stripes and a leopard have spots?"

Visual skills are practiced when children seek answers to questions like:

- "What markings do you see on the tortoise's shell?"
- "How does the tarantula move?"

Emotional relationships can be considered:

- "How do you think that cub feels separated from its mother?"
- "Do you think the elephant on the left minds being the smallest?"

Social dimensions can be explored:

- "Why do you think they've put all the rhesus monkeys in one cage?"

Moral development, too, can be enhanced:

- "What would you do if you were that sea otter and the keeper threw all the fish to the other otter so you didn't get any?"

Many full experiences can be created at home. Planning and holding a backyard picnic provides opportunities to touch on every domain of development. "Let's have a picnic in the backyard. Would you like to? What can we prepare that will make our picnic look as good as it tastes? What kinds of plants will we see on our picnic? Your little brother is asleep and can't come right now. How will he feel if we have our picnic without him? Is there a friend close by you would like to invite? Do you think your friend should bring something to our picnic? Do you know people who never get to go on picnics? Does it matter? What could you do about that?"

NOTES OF ASSURANCE

Parenting is important and rewarding, even though at times it is frustrating or a bit overwhelming. The two most important keys to good parenting are love and understanding. These keys are much more important than

whether the family structure has a single parent or two parents, or whether the parents are step-parents, adoptive parents or natural parents. Love literally "carries a family through." Talks with other parents of gifted children, as well as parent education courses and books, can help parents develop a better understanding of their individual children and the parenting task. As parents learn about their children's growth needs, and as they offer consistency, reliability, warmth and love, they will support in a very natural way the healthiest development of their gifted children.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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SOURCES OF INFORMATION ON TALENTED AND GIFTED

Association for the Gifted (TAG)
Council for Exceptional Children
1920 Association Drive
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ERIC Clearinghouse on Handicapped and Gifted
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Reston, Virginia 22091

National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC)
217 Gregory Drive
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National/State Leadership Training Institute on Gifted/
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